

Religious references have been common in Cambodian banknotes for decades. Buddha Avalokitechvara from the Bayon temple has been repeatedly depicted, as watermarks and/or illustrations, in 1955-56, 1961, 1963, 1972 and other banknote issues which remained in circulation until the Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975.

Between 1979 and 1995, the only note to bear a Buddha Avalokitechvara image was the 50 Riel note 1979 series. After adoption of the present-day Constitution and reinstatement of Buddhism as the State religion, the image came back on the 1,000 and 10,000 Riel banknotes in the 1995 series, to be later joined by the 5,000 and 10,000 Riel denominations 2001-2007 series (watermark) and the 20,000 Riel note 2008 issue (both as the watermark and an illustration on the reverse side).

In the above respect, the new 100 Riel banknote 2014 series follows and further develops the said tradition, which was re-established after the liberation from the Khmer Rouge and further strengthened after adoption of the present-day Constitution cementing the role of Buddhism in the Cambodian society.

Importantly, religious references have been commonly and internationally used in payment media (coins, banknotes and postage stamps) in different parts of the world for centuries.

The earliest historical examples known.

Byzantine coins (Solids) depicting Jesus Christ, which were in international circulation from IV to XII centuries AD.

Sicilian Ducats 1140 depicting Jesus Christ and bearing the following inscription: “The kingdom you rule is dedicated to you, Jesus”.

Cehins of the Venetian Republic 1202 and 1284, bearing images of Jesus Christ and St. Mark.

The earliest traceable circulation banknote depicting the Buddha (2 images backed by parts of the Borobudur temple) was issued back in 1944 (10 Dutch East Indies Gulden).

Modern times – best known examples.

a) Verbal references:

“In God We Trust” – US Dollars.

“Deus Seja Louvado” (“God Be Praised”) – Brazilian Real notes (1986 – present).

“Lumbini the birth place of Lord Buddha” – new (2012) 100 Nepalese Rupee banknote.

b) Symbolic references:

“The God’s Eye” – US Dollars.

Pa Kua (Ba Gua) – Singapore Dollars;

The Cross – numerous banknotes, incl. Swiss Francs.

Dharma Wheel on the Indian Rupee (several issues, i.e. 20 Rupee 1983 series)

Mogen David (David’s Star) – Israeli Shekels.

c) Graphic depictions – past Gods:

Athena on 100 Drahma note (Greece) 1978 issue.

Europa on the new series of the Euro notes.

d) Graphic depiction – present Gods.

The Buddha on the 2012 Nepalese notes (100 Rupee)

Vishnu on pre-2007 Nepalese banknotes.

Indra on the 500 Nepalese Rupee note (2012)

The Buddha on coins of Bhutan (“World Buddha Heritage” series, 2010 – present)

The Buddha on 15,000 Lao Kip coin (2006)

The Buddha on 50,000 Korean Won coin (2012)

Virgin Mary on 200 Mexican Pesos note 2010 series

Virgin Mary with young Jesus on 1000 Macedonian Denari banknote 2003 issue.

Jesus Christ and John the Baptizer on Nagorno-Karabakh 2 Dram note 2004 series.

The above list can be continued.

With respect to the Cambodian banknotes in particular, we deem the religious references as contained therein fully valid and relevant. Article 4 of the Constitution proclaims the motto of the Kingdom of Cambodia as “Nation, Religion, King” – while Article 43 explicitly states that Buddhism is the State religion.

Being neither atheist, nor anticlerical or antireligious, the Cambodian State inclusive of all bodies and subdivisions thereof is not legally or otherwise limited in making legitimate references to the existence of the higher being, the Divinity.

For additional reference:

1. Debate is currently underway in India (incl. in the press) as to the graphic contents of the next series of the Indian Rupee banknotes. There's some strong opposition in the Indian society as to continuation of depicting Mahatma Gandhi – or other past political figures (e.g. Javaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi) on the banknotes of the future generation – all in favour of devoting the new series to the Hindu Gods.
2. In the run-up to issuing the 100 Nepalese Rupee banknote dedicated to the Buddha, Pawan Pathak, a prominent Nepalese Hindu cleric made the following comment: "...We are happy of the choice. It would have been different if Mao or Marx appeared on the money, but fortunately this did not happen".